

## 6 What is Sin?<sup>1</sup>

“Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God” (Isa 59:2 RSV). In what sense is this so? What is the nature of sin?

### 1 The Symbolism of Sin

Scripture has a telling range of terms for sin: to list the most common, sin means failure, rebellion, transgression, trespass, turning from the right road, stain, infidelity. Each of these terms is a symbolic expression, one that takes some deeply significant human experience and utilizes it to illumine aspects of our relationship with God. This illumination is all one way traffic. Being aware of such features in our relationship with God also helps us understand our ordinary human experiences and relationships, as the notions of fatherhood and family start with God and move from there to humanity rather than vice versa, according to Eph 3:14-15. But we do go about conceptualizing and articulating our relationship with God in light of our deep and significant human experiences. These provide us with our symbols for thinking and communicating. And as is often the case with symbols, any individual expression opens a window on a broader symbolism or on a story of which it freezes a single frame. Each symbol belongs to a comprehensive picture of relations with God.

We are familiar, for instance, with the experience of living under the political authority of an imperial power. A postcolonial context is aware of the oppressive aspect to that, but the First Testament is also aware of the benefits of security and order such a position can bring. The treaty relationship places a people under the obligation of allegiance to the superior power and limits its freedom in relation to other powers, both great imperial powers to whom it might submit and other powers of equivalent status to its own with which it might ally on equal terms for mutual benefit. To transfer its allegiance to some other authority or to ally with other states independently of its relationship with that supreme authority or to adopt some other policy unapproved by the imperial power counts as rebellion (e.g., 2 Kings 1:1; 18:7). It is likely to attract the imperial power's attention and provoke that power to “pay it a visit”, as the delightfully mafia-like Hebrew expression puts it (the verb *pāqad*, usually translated “punish” in this connection in modern translations), to bring it back into line. Such redress may possibly be averted if it terminates the rebellion and pledges renewed allegiance; the imperial power may then be willing to grant pardon. God, then, is like an imperial power (God is Lord), our covenant relationship with God involves allegiance to God to the exclusion of other allegiances, sin is like the rebellion that breaks such a covenant relationship (e.g., Hos 8:1) and puts us in danger of God paying us a visit to put us in our place, but repentance can open up the possibility of pardon. The two Hebrew terms for rebellion are *pesha'* (often translated “transgression” in English Bibles) and *mered*. The word “rebellion” appears strangely rarely in the English New Testament, where it

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translates the Greek word *parapikrasmos*, but it seems likely that the more common word translated “sin”, *hamartia*, also has this connotation (in the Septuagint *hamartia* often translates *pesha*’).

In this example, as in the ones that follow, in various ways I schematize for the sake of clarity. The First Testament speaks of “rebellion” in the context of parent-child relationships, for instance (see Isa 1:2), as well as those of political relationships. No doubt the word for rebellion gained a theological life of its own; people who used it were not immediately aware of the whole story I have just summarized. Christians often use expressions such as “Christ’s redemption” without being consciously aware that we are thinking in terms of someone anointed by God buying back a slave from bondage. Yet these are not merely dead metaphors, but symbols that still carry freight, as we can see from their usage in other contexts.

The example also points to the limitations as well as the potential in all such symbols. Talk in terms of political authority-allegiance-rebellion-pardon illumines some aspects of our relationship with God but obscures others, as critique of the “monarchic metaphor” notes.<sup>2</sup> Any one family of symbols needs to be set in the context of the others so that we can avoid being led astray by some features of it. There are limitations to a comparison of God and the mafia godfather.

Alongside the symbolism of rebellion is thus that of infidelity (Hebrew *meshubah*, literally “turning” [to someone else]; Greek *apistia*). So the relationship between God and humanity is like a marriage: “I belong to my lover and my lover belongs to me” has as its equivalent “I belong to you as your God and you belong to me as my people”. One basic requirement of this relationship is a committed faithfulness that excludes other partners. Sin is then like the infidelity that involves a man or a woman behaving as if they have the same rights over themselves as they had before they married, as if they are still free to give themselves to someone else. The imagery is used especially powerfully in Jer 3. Such action probably indicates that there was already some breakdown in the relationship; when uncovered, the breakdown is deepened and is on the way to becoming separation and divorce. Reversing that process requires a desire to heal the relationship, a willingness to resume that exclusive mutual commitment, and a forgiveness on the part of the wronged party.

Or sin is like some equivalent act of disloyalty that wrongs a friendship (e.g., Jer 5:11; the Hebrew noun is *beqed*, the Greek adjective *asunthetos*). So God is a friend who shares the mutual love of friendship with us. While friendship does not require exclusive loyalty in the manner of marriage, it presupposes a form of mutual commitment. Speaking ill of a friend, or taking advantage of the friendship, or acting in a way calculated to bring loss to the friend, imperils the friendship. It risks replacing friendship by the anger, conflict, and enmity that are so often the other side of hurt when a friend treats us in way that suggests the relationship means nothing to them. Restoring the friendship requires mutual reconciliation. Our friendship with God is likewise imperiled by our behaving in a way that suggests that the relationship means nothing to us, provoking that anger that is the other side of hurt. Its restoring depends on mutual reconciliation.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Brian Wren, *Faith Looking Forward* (Oxford/New York: OUP, 1983).

Or sin is like the ungrateful forgetfulness of a child. Hosea 11 relates the classic pained testimony of a mother or father who has given all the attention required of a parent in bringing up a child and met with no response. Paul strikingly includes ingratitude as a damning feature of the attitude to God shown by humanity as a whole, which leads to its standing under God's wrath (Rom 1:21).

Or sin is like getting dirty (Isa 6:5; Lam 1:9). In the First Testament this symbol is linked with the holiness of God. This holiness that suggests God's majesty, heavenliness, and glory is the characteristic that marks God off from human beings. It is originally not a moral category but a metaphysical one; it suggests supernatural transcendence, the distinctiveness that differentiates creator from creature.<sup>3</sup> It requires a parallel distinctiveness on the part of people who associate themselves with God. Such distinctiveness is imperiled through contact with the realm of blood and death, which stains people and renders them taboo. The stain (in Hebrew *tum'ah*) or impurity (in Greek *akatharsia*) spoils the relationship and requires cleansing.

Or sin is like wandering out of the way (the Hebrew term is *'awon*, a common expression usually rendered "iniquity"; the less common equivalent Greek term is *plane*). So God is a guide who points out the right way to go if we wish to reach a certain destination. The relationship of travelers to their guide is that they take care to follow the way the guide points. But distractions or alternative advice or inattention may lead to their accidentally losing their way or deliberately turning out of the right way (cf. Isa 53:6; Jer 3:21). Instead of being straight their journey becomes tortuous, twisting, and twisted. They err and go the wrong way rather than the right way and as a result get lost or find themselves in exile. By its nature, being lost or exiled makes it difficult or impossible to get back to the right road or to return to one's home; we need the guide to follow us and restore us.

Or sin is like trespassing on someone's property or rights or honor (e.g., Josh 22:16-31; Rom 4:5; 5:6). A human being may possess home, land, and rights such as honor, freedom, and privacy; God, too, is one who has rights that require respect. God's own person deserves honor. Sin involves trespassing on God's rights (in Hebrew *ma'al*), refusing to recognize God's majesty (in Greek *asebeia*), and putting oneself into God's debt (the expression that comes in the Lord's Prayer). The question is whether we can make up for such neglect or offer God satisfactory compensation for such loss. Some debts can be repaid, but others cannot; we can only rely on the creditor's willingness to remit the debt so that it no longer stands between the two parties.

Or sin is like the transgression of law (the Hebrew verb is *'abar*, the Greek noun *parabasis*). God, then, is like a human monarch in his or her capacity as lawmaker or legal authority. This aspect of the monarch's role had great importance in the Middle Eastern world: there the monarch has responsibility for the making of laws that preserve order in society and safeguard people's rights, especially the rights of the less secure and powerless. Subjects have responsibility for obedience to those laws to that same end. Refusal to obey them counts as "transgression," the crossing of bounds set by the law; it puts us in the wrong in relation to the law. It makes us guilty and renders us liable to the judgment of the courts and to the

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<sup>3</sup> See chapter 1 above.

penalty they have authority and power to exact, not least as a way of dissociating monarch and nation from the values expressed in the acts of lawlessness. Normally there is no way to escape that punishment, though in special circumstances the monarch may exercise power of reprieve that restores the guilty person without their undergoing punishment. Similarly God is the lawmaker and legal authority in the world. As is ideally the case with the state's laws, God's laws reflect the concerns of justice and reflect and buttress the very structure of reality itself. To live by God's laws is to live in obedience to God and in accordance with justice. To decline to acknowledge the just requirements of God's law (for instance by violence towards one's neighbor or by trampling on the rights of the powerless) is to decline to acknowledge God or to know God (see, e.g., Hos 4:1-6). It is to become a transgressor: "Sin is lawlessness" (1 John 3:4). It makes us guilty before God and renders us liable to God's judgment and to the punishment that God has power and authority to exact, which dissociates God from our injustice and lawlessness as well as doing something to restore justice to the violated. In considering reprieve with regard to such penalty, God would have to consider what this said about the unimportance of flouting just laws.

Or sin is like failure to achieve something (Hebrew *hatta't*, Greek *hamartia*). In secular usage the term suggests missing a target or missing the way (Judg 20:16; Prov 19:2). The most familiar allusion to sin in the entire Bible may be Paul's assertion that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23). It well illustrates how the term "sin" itself can in Greek as in Hebrew suggest the idea of failure, though we have noted that its regular usage points to some more active wrongdoing. The story to which this symbol belongs envisages God as like a parent who lays a possible destiny before a child, a possible role for the child to fulfill, a possible calling for them, and who has the insight and experience to be able to indicate ways for them to realize this destiny. The implication need not be that the child is merely doing what mother says; they have the opportunity to develop their own insight, make their own decisions, and make that calling their own. They are challenged to take up this calling and fulfill their destiny in a way that will bring glory to them and glory to their parent. Sin is like neglect to make that destiny one's own, willful and stupid failure to realize it. This willfulness indeed indicates that we are speaking of more than accidental failure. If the New Testament does use the word *hamartia* with some of the flavor of the First Testament word for "rebellion", that reflects how sin involves active resistance to the destiny God sets before us. Its result is disappointment and futility: life has become pointless and meaningless, and the relationship between parent and child is spoiled by sadness, regret, frustration, letdown, and discomfiture. The question for the future is whether parent and child can find a new beginning to the path toward that destiny that the one has in mind for the other. Discipline (God's and the human parent's) will be of importance in encouraging this process.

## 2 The Extent of Sin

Both Testaments use this wide range of symbols to express the nature of sin. How prevalent a problem is it?

In our own parlance we have two ways of speaking of this matter. We can think of humanity as divided into the good, the bad, and the ordinary. The good are the especially generous, open, forgiving people. The bad are the abusers, the oppressors, the deceivers. We locate ourselves and most other people in between these two categories: neither especially good nor especially bad, as we are neither especially wise or rich, foolish or poor. At the same time we recognize that whatever may be true of the bad, strangely the good do not see themselves as good (as the wise and rich fail to see themselves as wise or rich). Indeed, paradoxically we would doubt their goodness if they did. They are characteristically aware of a meanness, a self-centeredness, and a resentfulness, even a capacity to abuse, oppress, and deceive, which they share with the so-called ordinary and bad.

Both Testaments also have these two ways of looking at goodness and badness. On the one hand, they can imply the division into the good, the bad, and the ordinary. Asked what one should do to inherit eternal life, Jesus simply reminds a questioner of the contents of the commandments about human relationships (Mark 10:19). When his questioner says he has kept these, Jesus declares that this achievement entitles him to an attempt at a higher hurdle. Neither directly nor indirectly does he express doubt about the man's claim; after all, the commandments were never intended to be some impossibly idealistic standard (see Deut 30:11-14). God gave them to be fulfilled as the condition of staying in a right relationship. In line with that, First Testament believers can declare that they have indeed fulfilled them, so that, for instance, God has no moral reason for letting them be in the trouble they are in. Psalm 18:20-27 [21-28] invites the worshipper to declare an astonishing innocence of sin, while the premise of the debate in Job is that there is such a thing as a person wholly committed to walking in God's way. Israel has its remarkably good people, and it also has its remarkably bad people: that devastating declaration "your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God" is not a general statement about human sinfulness but a pointed critique of a particular group of people in a specific context.

The First Testament also includes indications of the other attitude that assumes the universality of sin. In Christian tradition we have been used to associating it with the opening chapters of Genesis; while this is a distinctively Christian understanding, not paralleled in Jewish interpretation, it is not foreign to the chapters. One aspect of their opening emphases is that there was nothing wrong with the world as God created it. The story is expressed in such a way as to set it off over against the way other Middle-Eastern peoples told the story of the world's beginnings, where the world came about as a result of fear and violent argument among the gods, and humanity itself was formed by the recycling of the corpse of the losing side's champion in this conflict. Conflict and violence antedate creation and permeate the raw material of creation. In Genesis the world and humanity were created good, even if it is odd that the serpent tempter is there in the Garden of Eden. Things go wrong because of human covetous stupidity inside the Garden and human jealous resentment east of Eden. The inclination to invade the divine sphere and the inclination to violence in the human sphere lead God to the gloomy conclusion that "the wickedness of humanity was great in the earth, and every inclination of the intentions of its heart was only

evil continually" (Gen 6:5), though in Gen 6:1-4 as in Gen 2 - 3 humanity might feel itself a tragic victim of alien pressures as much as a willful violator of divine love.

Of course that statement of humanity's universal corruption and violence (cf. Gen 6:11-12) might be seen as another contextual statement about a particular generation. Its apparent universalism is in any case compromised by the recognition that Noah does not conform to the rule of sin. Noah, indeed, is a man of justice and integrity, a man whom God likes to take out for company: in effect, the story virtually implies he is without sin. Yet Noah subsequently manages to prove himself fallible like the rest, unable to contain his drink or control his children, though there is again an element of tragedy as well as of humored pathos in the account (Gen 9:20-27). So he is no complete exception to the further gloomy acknowledgment that comes the other side of the flood that in general "the inclination of the human heart is evil from its youth" (Gen 8:21; cf. Jer 17:9). When a psalm invites us to recognize that we were sinners when our mothers conceived us (Ps 51:5 [7]) it is only taking that conviction to its logical conclusion. We are sinners from our earliest beginnings. There is no one who does not sin (1 Kings 8:46).

This second side to the First Testament's convictions about sin also reappears in the attitude of Jesus. He himself reacted negatively to being called "good"; is the term appropriate to any human being? (Mark 10:18). Of course in truth he was the exception to this rule, but his questioner hardly implied such an awareness. Jesus identifies with the rest of humanity in affirming that in the absolute sense the word does not apply to him. Given that he rejected this description for himself, it is not surprising that when faced by people who were committed to a life of goodness, or other people who were inclined to be impressed (or depressed) by them, he attempted to shake the former into a recognition that they had to face questions about what was going on in their inner selves and not be taken in by the outward symbolism of their goodness (Mark 7). These are the people who set the benchmark for goodness and commitment; so Jesus tells his own followers that he expects of them a more spectacular standard of right living (Matt 5:20). Not that he is romantic about those followers, as if poverty or ordinariness can be equated with goodness. They themselves are "evil" rather than good (Matt 7:11).

Paul's talk of sin also has those two strands to it. He can (semi-humorously?) mull over the question whether a person might be willing to sacrifice their life for a righteous person or, more plausibly, for a good person (Rom 5:7). But even that hypothesizing is set in the context of a declaration that in the case of the self-sacrifice of Jesus the beneficiaries were ungodly, sinners, enemies of God, a characterization not of a wicked group within humanity but of humanity as a whole.

Paul's thinking is indeed dominated by the second of the strands. In that most systematic exposition of his gospel in Romans he begins by setting forth his understanding of the nature and prevalence of sin, for this is the necessary backcloth to his understanding of the gospel. Its prominence reflects the fact that we are now this side of Jesus' actual death and resurrection. Paradoxically (or perhaps not), sin becomes a problem when it has been dealt with.

Before his confrontation with Christ on the Golan Heights, Paul took the view Jesus encouraged, that his responsibility as a member of the covenant people was to see to his obedience to the commandments and live a life of commitment to God's ways. He recalls the moral and spiritual achievements of that life when he gives us his testimony in Phil 3. There is no indication that he felt any conscious dissatisfaction with it as he drew near Damascus that day. Then he is overturned by the risen Christ and has to rethink his entire scale of values now he has to view Christ's resurrection as fact and to discover the positive theological significance of Christ's death. Attempting to think through convictions inherent in the account of the gospel he received (1 Cor 15:3), he comes to expound Christ's death as in some way designed to deal with human sin; but this means that the problem of human sin and the nature of real goodness must be more profound than he had realized. It gives him access to that second strand in First Testament thinking expressed in Genesis, the Psalms, and Isaiah, which he expounds in Rom 1 - 5.

He sees that by nature we are not merely occasional lawbreakers but habitual ones, like teenage joyriders breaking the law for kicks (but no doubt indicating our inner need as we do so), living a life not merely marked by individual transgressions but characterized by inherent lawlessness (*anomia*); against our own better judgment we ignore what the law expects and what we ourselves want (Rom 7). We prefer our own vision of our destiny and our own insight on how to achieve it, "earthly wisdom" rather than the divine grace expressed in the folly of the message of the cross (2 Cor 1:12), and we thus inevitably fail and fall short of the glory of God because that is not the destiny at which we are aiming (Rom 3:23). We are constitutionally rather than periodically rebellious; far from living as in a realm in which God exercises authority, we live under the authority of sin, in a sense by choice, but now unable to declare independence from its power, at least until God acts to take us from that realm into the realm of God's rule (Rom 5:21; 6:12-18). Having once wandered off from that path towards the provision of grass and water along which the shepherd guides the sheep, we are lost and incapable of finding the way again (Luke 15:3-7). Far from being inclined to reverence God's claim on our lives and our worship, we are characterized by irreverence, impiety, and ungodliness. Our lives are not so much generally clean and pure even if needing cleansing from the occasional dirt that inevitably comes to attach to them, as hopelessly and deeply stained in a way that affect their every layer, quite spoils them, and shames us into hiding from the purity of God. Our infidelity to God as lover, our disloyalty to God as friend, and our ignoring of God as generous father has placed a barrier of conflict, anger, and enmity between us that we as the people in the wrong can hardly begin to attempt to overcome.

It is these realities that are analyzed theologically as original sin and total depravity. As the Church of England Articles put it, "Original sin standeth not in the following of Adam": it is not that we all start afresh and fall for ourselves. We are born into a humanity characterized by realities such as rebellion, lawlessness, and failure, living in a world in which sin has been allowed to exercise some authority. There is a certain inevitability about our being the same sort of people as those among whom we are born, grow, and live; we are bound up in the web of life with them in a way that links us in sin

(as well as in other aspects of our humanity) with humanity, as it goes back to humanity's first turning away from God. And even our best deeds are affected by sin ("have the nature of sin": Article 13) because of the context in which they are set in our lives and the stain it gives them.

### 3 The Consequences of Sin

We have already begun to consider what are the consequences of sin. A prominent theme in theological discussion of this matter is the anger of God.

One can perceive two ways in which scripture envisages humanity under God's anger. They correspond to the two ways of seeing the problem of sinfulness that we have considered. In the First Testament in general, anger is God's response to particular wrong deeds rather than a characteristic attitude for God to take to human beings. Actually, the First Testament repeatedly affirms how slow God is to get angry (e.g., Exod 34:6), sometimes to the despair of God's servants who wish God would be a little quicker (Jonah 4:2). In considering the Bible's symbols for sin we have referred to anger in connection with the friendship-disloyalty-reconciliation family of words. Sometimes a friend or relative or someone else of whom we have expectations because of their relationship with us lets us down or deceives us or attacks us or imposes unreasonable expectations on us. It is then that we find we get angry (cf. Gen 27:45; 30:2; 31:36; 34:7; 39:19; 44:18). Anger is a strong feeling associated with jealousy, pain, and grief in the context of a personal relationship.

God's anger thus emerges from a close personal relationship with Israel. Israel is not permanently subject to God's anger, but is so from time to time as a consequence of its unreasonable attitudes that are parallel to the ones we have noted in connection with human relationships (e.g., Num 11:1; 12:9; 22:22; 25:3; 32:10). The motif of Yahweh's anger exercised on Israel from time to time (and on other nations) becomes a prominent one in the prophets (e.g., Isa 10:4, 5, 25).

In contrast to the way systematic theology has sometimes seen things, anger is noticeably less prominent when the First Testament talks about atonement, and where one might have expected talk of the propitiation of God's anger. The language of atonement-propitiation-expiation and of anger do not come together. The problem with sin in Leviticus is not that sin makes God angry but that sin pollutes, stains, and spoils, and thus makes people or things incompatible with who God is and incapable of coming into God's presence because of the clash between what they are and what God is. The problem that sacrifice then deals with is not anger but revulsion or repulsiveness, a pollution of which human beings are as aware as God is. By means of sacrifice God makes it possible for humanity's stain to be dealt with. In this connection sacrifice "is not something human beings do to God (propitiation) but something which God does for humankind (expiation)."<sup>4</sup> Sacrifice does not directly relate to anger.

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<sup>4</sup> Paul S. Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation* (London: DLT/Philadelphia: Westminster, 1989), p. 71.



A number of psalms appeal to God to turn from wrath when no reason for the exercise of wrath is indicated. Christian instinct is to assume that such psalms implicitly acknowledge that this wrath is a response to human sin; thus Ps 6 is one of the Christian “penitential psalms” despite its offering no expression of penitence. More likely such psalms presuppose an experience of illness, defeat, or other calamity. They assume that God is responsible for what happens in the world, and is thus responsible for this experience. The event is the kind of thing that happens when someone is angry with you, so it is described as an expression of God’s anger even though the psalmist does not know what might have caused this anger. There is an even more impersonal expression of this way of thinking, when the First Testament refers simply to wrath coming on someone (see notably 2 Kgs 3:27). Here, too, anger is particular not general.

The Pauline notion of anger as a standing attitude to humanity corresponds to the second of the Bible’s strands of attitude to the extent of sin. It sees the whole world as lying under God’s wrath. This is not a First Testament way of speaking, though there is a First Testament equivalent to it. The First Testament’s way of expressing the reality to which Paul is drawing attention is to speak in terms of curse, not in terms of anger. As a result of events related in the opening chapters of Genesis the ground comes to be under God’s curse, and so does humanity itself. The curse works itself out in the way the ground produces its fruit only at the cost of excessive toil. The idea of such a curse at work is paralleled by the way Paul speaks of God in wrath giving up humanity to the grievous consequences of its own rejection of God, in Rom 1. Both indicate awareness of the fact that there is something grievously wrong with human life as we experience it, as a result of decisions made by God to allow (even to encourage) the consequences of human sin to work themselves out in human experience in the world. They do not imply that God’s characteristic attitude to humanity is one of glowering anger. They do indicate awareness of the alienation and estrangement that may be the secularized form taken by separation from God in the modern age, not least as reflected in the work of writers such as Hegel, Marx, Freud, Camus and Sartre.<sup>5</sup>

In both the senses in which scripture sees humanity as under God’s anger (as an occasional and as an ongoing reality), it is something that hangs over us as well as something we experience. The wrath that is to come threatens to be more fearful than the wrath that has yet fallen upon us or yet worked out its way in our lives.

God’s act of self-sacrifice in Christ was designed to deal with the deep and incurable sinfulness of humanity that expresses itself in rebellion against God’s authority, infidelity that issues in breakdown of the relationship, disloyalty that has interrupted a friendship, ingratitude that has imperiled love, stain that has rendered humanity repulsive, perversity that has landed us in exile, offensiveness that has put us in debt, lawlessness that has made us guilty, and failure that leaves us far short of our destiny.

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. F. W. Dillistone, *The Christian Understanding of Atonement* (London: Nisbet/Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968), pp. 2-16, 399-404; Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation*, pp. 6-12.